

 r/HFY · Posted by u/Strong\_\_Horse 7 hours ago 

## The Death Curse

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Running through unfamiliar woods is probably one of the stupidest things someone could do. It was so easy to roll an ankle and end up tumbling down the side of a mountain. And then where would you be? Lost in the forest, hopping around on one leg, that's where. Even in the best of circumstances that alone could be a death sentence. Bruce knew all this, yet here he was, darting under branches and skipping over errant roots as fast as his legs would take him.

He *hated* what he was doing, but couldn't stop. Instead he kept his eyes wide and tried to gauge the exact length and position each of his strides would need to be to avoid catastrophe. And all the while he could hear his pursuer getting closer. It wasn't enough. Even putting his life in his hands with every quickened step of his feet wasn't enough to outrun that enormous beast that was chasing him. He had no choice; he would have to use magic.

To say that Bruce hated magic would be an understatement of monumental proportions. He blamed it for every misfortune that had ever befallen him. Even now he wondered if it wouldn't be better to take his chances with the beast that was chasing him. Was it even really that bad? Maybe he'd only been imagining things. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw snarling teeth and glowing red eyes mounted in the frame of a hairy monster large enough to uproot entire trees with one swipe of its paw. No. It really *was* that bad. Bruce had read the stories of the mighty Offenhunds of centuries past but never in his wildest dreams would he have believed the accounts. Monsters big as houses? How would they even feed themselves? Why didn't they leave behind any bones?

He would have *never come to this time* if he'd known the Offenhunds were real! He would have told that fat fucking king to eat a prick and find someone *else* to carry out his hair-brained scheme! But it was too late for all that. His *stupid fucking magic* had brought him to this god-awful century where unspeakable monsters apparently hunted scrawny hedge mages like him for food and now his *stupid fucking magic* would have to be the thing that got him out of it. It was just that it so often ended up making everything worse.

How far would he have to travel to get away from this thing? An hour? No, probably not long enough. A year would do it. He'd *love* to jump a year and be done with this whole thing, but the thought of having to sit around for that long to wait for time to catch back up made his stomach turn. No, even while being hunted like this he *had* to keep his wits—

"Awoooo!" the Offenhund howled. It was close now and getting closer. Bruce felt the ground shift under his feet with the weight of the monster's steps. It wasn't fair, it looked like it was only walking yet it gained on him so quickly!

A week, Bruce decided. He'd go back a week. That *had* to be long enough! He spread his hands, adjusted the radial positioning of his fingers to align with the planetary configuration of a week prior and clapped them together. There was no fancy flash of light or a crash of sound any louder than the normal clapping of one idiot's hands, but Bruce found himself standing in basically the exact same forest as before.

He turned around. Nope. There was *one* important difference: this forest did *not* have an Offenhund chasing him. So that was one problem solved; now he just had to find a place to settle down and wait for a week to go by. He was no great master of survival but over the years he'd taught himself the basics for just such an occasion. You see, despite Bruce having mastered the art of traveling through time, he could only travel in *one* direction. To go forward he had to sit around with his thumb up his ass traveling at the leisurely pace of one-second-per-second until he arrived at the appropriate *when*.

Magic was all a bunch of bullshit, as far as Bruce was concerned. Humans that were unlucky enough to be born with some only got *one* talent and Bruce's had to be the most useless that had ever been conceived of. He didn't even know how old he was! He'd been born in 1386 but before he'd left his present it was only 1395 and he was *clearly* an adult. His whole life had become waiting around for specific things to happen. As a child he'd even taken to repeating the same day over and over until he got everything right. That had stopped working when he'd grown too old for school in the space of a few weeks and been kicked out. And *now* look what he'd gotten himself into! He'd end up dying hundreds of years before he'd ever even been born!

With an angry huff, Bruce looked for a likely place to set up a camp. He'd be here for a while so he knew the location would be crucial. His first instinct was to find the nearby creek he'd seen a week ago when he'd been running from that Offenhund... but then he remembered the Offenhund. It was probably still in this valley somewhere. If he knew what was good for him—and he hardly believed he did—he'd set up camp far up on a hill, somewhere he'd be able to see an enormous beast like that from a distance so he could start running in the opposite direction. Yeah. Fuck water. He decided getting high up was far more important.

For the first time since his arrival in the distant past Bruce actually looked around at the forest he was in. He could finally appreciate it without frantic adrenaline narrowing his vision to a pinprick. It was actually kind of nice. Big tall trees, short mossy greenery covering the ground. It was quiet, peaceful. The air was even clean. He'd only seen this place several hundred years in the future and by then all these trees had been cut down to put up houses and make room for cattle farms. Those damn goblins that had settled in Brucendia lately just *hated* trees at least as much as they loved fresh meat. The king had gotten rich by... wait a second. What was he thinking? None of that had happened yet! He had to stop living in the future.

Bruce located the nearest hill and got to climbing. On his way, he stopped to take a drink at the shallow creek cutting through this valley. It would be a pain to trudge up and down a hill every day just for a drink of water, but he'd manage. He could find some sharp rocks and use them to cut down some saplings and... Ugh! He was getting tired just *thinking* about it. Being forced to learn basic woodland survival skills when all he wanted to do was sit around and eat cake all day had to be about the worst part of his

magic. What was he even going to do for shelter tonight? All he had on him were the clothes on his back. It was supposed to be an in-and-out, twenty minute adventure. All because of that damn beast! All because... he spotted something ahead.

Up on the very same hill Bruce was climbing he saw a smoke trail climbing into the still air. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it earlier. The closer he got the more pronounced it became. Wood fire smoke; had to be. Was someone camping out here? That didn't feel right. The histories he'd read before leaving had told him this land hadn't been settled until after the Offenhunds had been killed and that was at *least* three decades from now. But no, the closer he got the more obvious it became that someone *was* camping up on this hill. Bruce couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not.

He was hungry, yes, and in need of shelter, also yes. All things you would expect to be found at someone's camp. But Bruce's experience with time travel had taught him that jumping back always tended to make his situation worse so he was more than a little apprehensive. Still... when the aroma of cooked meat made its way to him his stomach took over his common sense. Surely it wouldn't do any harm to just get close enough to take a look, right? He could always fuck off down the hill if the camp looked dangerous. After all, anyone that was willing to brave Offenhund-infested forests was probably *way* better in a fight than Bruce. Any time he really needed to kick someone's ass he always tended to resort to using time travel to gang up on his victim five or even six-on-one. Fuck a fair fight. Well, hmmm. That gave him an idea. Maybe he could do that here. A couple dozen jumps and he and all his past selves could throw one rock at whoever had set up this camp and he could claim it for his own.

He decided to at least take a look first. Couldn't hurt. When he got closer, Bruce slowed his pace. He crept forward; moving from cover-to-cover, peeking over boulders and around tree trunks to try to get a glimpse of this camp before the inhabitant got a glimpse of him. Then he finally saw it. Wide out in the open was... a wooden hut. It was a square thing, just tall enough to stand up in and only a few paces long on each side. It looked handmade but solid, resting flat against the stony ground with no foundation to speak of. What kind of idiot would build something like that so far up on a hill like this? It was above the treeline, meaning they would have had to drag all their supplies uphill. It wasn't even that near a water source. Bruce had to assume the inhabitant had thought the same thing he had: keeping eyes on the Offenhunds was more important around here than setting up a convenient camp.

He didn't see anyone walking around so he decided it was safe to get a little closer. The smoke was coming from a hole in the center of the steeped roof of the hut. Outside it looked like the inhabitant had set up a work station of sorts. There were a variety of cutting instruments strewn about, all made of stone. As he got closer he even saw a half-finished basket someone had been weaving out of fibrous vines from the forest below. Similar vines were draped over the door of the hut. Bruce knew what the survival shelter of a single person living out in the woods looked like. He'd made such shelters himself before. Realizing that's what he faced here allowed him to relax. He could take one guy in a fight. Even if the guy had a sword and knew how to use it he wouldn't be able to face a dozen Bruce's armed with stones if push came to shove.

Just to be safe, Bruce picked up a rock before calling out. "Hello? Someone there?"

"Ah! You're finally here!" a voice called back.

A human man walked out of the hut, pushing the draped vines aside as he emerged. Bruce was a little puzzled by the man's appearance. It seemed he'd fashioned a crude mask for his face out of woven plant fibers. Otherwise, the man looked pretty healthy. His exposed arms were lean with muscle, if a bit darkened by the sun. If he'd been asked to describe the man's skin color Bruce thought he might have said, "Golden." The man radiated health and confidence. But aside from his body, he was making Bruce's throwing arm feel a bit twitchy. He had his mess of hair pulled back in a simple ponytail behind his mask and wore horribly-stained brown rags. They hardly appeared to qualify as clothes, but considering how far they were from civilization Bruce supposed he might be able to give him a pass on that. It was just the mask that really threw him off. He decided he'd at least try talking to the guy before deciding he was crazy, even though wearing a mask while you're all alone in the woods was about the looniest thing Bruce could imagine.

The man held both his hands out in a placating manner. "I know what you're thinking. The mask, right?"

"Oh, you're wearing a mask?" Bruce asked innocently. "I hadn't noticed." He had *very much* noticed, he just hated confrontation.

"Yeah, well, I get nervous when I meet new people," the man said, "so I'd prefer to keep my face covered until we get to know each other better."

"And you were expecting to meet someone out here?" Bruce asked. "You *are* aware that you're in the middle of fucking nowhere, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I was expecting you."

Bruce cocked his head to the side. He heard the words the man was saying but couldn't get them to make sense.

"Expecting *me*? As in not just any old person, but me *specifically*?"

"Well, yeah. You were sent here by King Dravor, right? Mission to enter the forgotten temple at noon on the solstice... you know what I'm talking about?"

Bruce blinked. "I... do... I just... don't know how *you* could possibly know about that. King Dravor sent me on this mission like three hundred years in the future. He hasn't even been *born* yet. The kingdom he rules hasn't even been *founded* yet. How..." Words escaped him. "Just how?"

The man laughed. "Don't worry. I *totally* understand the confusion. But you remember when the king was giving you your mission?"

"I remember a lot of the 'I'll have you swinging on those gallows tomorrow so you better just do what I say because you're dead either way' talk, if that's what you mean."

"Sure, right." The man nodded. "But do you remember the part where he said he'd give you a way to get back home?"

"I... didn't actually believe..."

"You told him how your magic works, how it only goes one way. He told you if you jump back to this exact time he'd make sure you had a way to get back home to your own time."

"There's actually a way to do that?" Bruce asked.

"Well, yeah," the man agreed. "That's why *I'm* here. I'm supposed to help you get back to your own time when your mission is done."

"Okay. That's good, I guess. Can you also lead me to this temple I'm supposed to... wait a second! Why did he need *me* to do this stupid mission for him if he had *you*? How did *you* get here? You can time travel too, can't you?"

The man nodded. "Sure can."

Bruce found he was strangely disappointed by that answer. Sure, he hated his time travel magic, but it had always made him feel just a teensy bit special knowing he was the only person to have ever been born with his specific power. Now he didn't even have *that*. "Well why *did* he send me back here then?" Bruce pressed. "I was supposed to enter the lost temple to recover the artifact at *precisely* noon on the solstice of the year 953. It wasn't like I had some special set of skills. Time travel *was* my skills! Why send *me* if you were able to jump here just the same?"

The golden man crossed his muscly arms in front of his chest. "Wow, you sure complain a lot," he said. "It's going to be a relief when you finally learn to get over that. Look, is it really such a big deal to find out you're not as special as you thought you were?"

Bruce scowled back at the man. "What? No! It just pisses me off to find out I was hired to go off into the sea to catch some specific fish only to find out *another* fisherman was sent to do the same job! And he's even a better fisherman!" Bruce gestured vaguely to the shelter the man had presumably constructed while he waited for him to show up.

"Don't dress things up like that," the man said. "I know you're real history. You weren't *hired* to do shit, so pull the stick out of your ass. We're here to do a job and it's going to take *both* of us to get it done."

Bruce scrunched his face up. “*Both* of us? Are you sure? Because I don’t think I need someone holding my hand while I walk into a temple and—”

The golden man waved a dismissive hand in the air between them. “Nah, forget all that shit,” he said. “That’s not the job.”

“Not the job? What are you talking about? The forgotten temple of—”

“The forgotten temple doesn’t fucking exist. Never did. The king made it up to get you to go on this mission.”

“*Get* me to go?” Bruce asked. “You just told me you know I was *forced* to go on this mission! Why would the king have to lie to me about what it was? He’d shut off my powers, installed an exploding glyph on the back of my head to kill me if I tried to escape. This is a joke, right? Someone pulled an elaborate prank on me? Am I about to wake up and realize this was all a dream?”

“Nah, it’s real,” the golden man said, “but you need to stop filtering everything in the world through the lens of your own personal experience. The king didn’t lie to you because he didn’t want *you* to know what your real mission was. He lied because he didn’t want his *court* to find out.”

“Why would he care what his court thinks? I told him I wasn’t going to be able to come back from this. As far as they were concerned I was going on a suicide mission.”

The golden man let out a sigh. “Man, talking to you is fucking aggravating.” He punched his hand down into his open palm to emphasize his next words. “You’re. Not. Listening. This mission you’re on is *highly* delicate. He couldn’t let anyone else know what he really had planned because if anyone caught wind of it they’d try to stop him.”

Bruce arched an eyebrow. “Stop a king? Really? Who’s going to stop him? One of his own servants?”

“Oh, man. I forgot how fucking stupid you are.”

“Look, you need to stop insulting me *right now* or I’m going to jump to last week and be done with this whole conversation.”

“Don’t threaten *me* with a good time. Go ahead. Jump to last week, then maybe you can help me build this fucking hut.” The golden man held out his callused hands. “Do you have any idea how hard this thing was to build?”

The threat of manual labor was like a cold splash of water to Bruce. “No, fine. I won’t jump anywhere, just stop calling me an idiot. It’s not my fault I don’t know everything. If *you* know so much, why don’t you teach me? What am I missing?”

“That King Dravor is a *minor* king to the newest and possibly *weakest* kingdom in all of Enimus. It’s the *only* kingdom ruled entirely by humans and the history of human-run kingdoms is pretty bleak. What would the orks do if they found out what he was

planning? Shit, what would the *e/ves* do?”

“Why? What’s he really planning?”

“What do you know about the Death Curse?”

Bruce involuntarily took a step back at hearing that name. “The Death Curse ended like 300 years—Shit! It’s 300 years ago *now!* He sent us to *end* the Death Curse? Is that how it was stopped?”

The golden man just threw back his head and laughed.

“What? What’s so funny?” Bruce demanded.

“Ahahaha! I can’t. I. I can’t. I can’t say.” He stopped, took a breath. “Okay, sorry. We’re *not* here to end the Death Curse, Bruce. Why would the other nations be concerned if some new king wanted to send agents back in time to end *that*? They’d probably help *fund* his mission if that’s what he was doing.”

“I don’t get it,” Bruce said. “Then why are we here? What does this have to do with the Death Curse?”

“We’re not trying to *stop* the Death Curse, buddy. We *are* the Death Curse.”